

George Washington Carver (circa 1864-1943)

An accomplished botanist and chemist, George Washington Carver discovered hundreds of uses for the peanut, sweet potato, and soy bean among other plants. Though he was born into slavery, as a free man he went on to graduate college and earn a master's degree, ultimately becoming the director of agricultural research at Tuskegee University under Book T. Washington. Carver was greatly concerned with the plight of Southern farmers and he worked to reinvigorate soil depleted by cotton crops. His scientific research was second only to the contribution he made to society and education, working toward the betterment of African Americans in the post-Civil War era.

Jesse Owens (1913-1980)

One of the most famous Olympians ever, Jesse Owens won four gold medals in track and field at the 1936 Berlin Olympics. Owens began breaking records in junior high school and high school and went on to compete at Ohio State University, where he most notably set three world records and tied a fourth all in one day. Though he was an athletic superstar, Owens had no scholarships and was forced to work menial jobs to pay his way through college and support his family. Owens's triumph at the Olympics was legendary: his four gold medals dramatically discredited Adolph Hitler's racist claims. He demonstrated the feats a person can achieve regardless of race or origin – a message that also resonated at home, since segregation was still the norm in the United States.

Hattie McDaniel (circa 1895-1952)

A gifted radio and film actress, Hattie McDaniel was the first African American to win an Academy award for her portrayal of Mammy in the classic movie *Gone with the Wind* (1939). It was estimated that McDaniel acted in more than 300 films throughout her career, though she received on-screen credit for far fewer. Most of the roles available to a black woman in Hollywood in the 1930's and 1940's were those of a maid or a cook, and McDaniel increasingly came under fire – especially toward the end of her career – for

the limited scope of her roles. But there can be no doubt that she set the stage for future minority actors and artists in Hollywood.

Ella Fitzgerald (1917-1996)

Ella Fitzgerald's bright, effortless vocals and singular talent made her one of the greatest jazz singers of all time. After winning a talent competition at Harlem's celebrated Apollo Theater when she was just sixteen, she went on to perform in bands and later as a solo singer. Nicknamed the "First Lady of Song," Ella is especially noted for her development of the vocal technique "scatting." Her numerous hit songs expanded interpretations of classic favorites by composers like Ira and George Gershwin and Cole Porter. Fitzgerald won thirteen Grammy Awards and is one of the best selling recording artists in history.

Jackie Robinson (1919-1972)

Ending years of segregation in U.S. sports, Jackie Robinson was the first African American to play baseball in the major leagues. Robinson was a standout athlete in high school and college, lettering at UCLA not just in baseball but also in football, basketball, and track. After serving in the army during World War II, Robinson went to play baseball in the Negro Leagues. From there, he was recruited to join the Brooklyn Dodgers, where he spent his entire career, breaking racial barriers as quickly as he broke athletic records. Among other awards and achievements, Robinson was the first African American to be inducted into the Baseball Hall of Fame. After he retired from sports, Robinson continued to lobby for racial equality and integration, writing letters to every U.S. president from 1956 until his death in 1972.

Rosa Parks (1913-2005)

Often called "the mother of the modern civil rights movement," Rosa Parks made history in 1955 when she was arrested for refusing to give up her seat on a public bus to a white man. This quiet act of defiance generated the Montgomery bus boycott, which brought Martin Luther King, Jr. to prominence. More broadly, her actions set off a fury of emotion across the country, bringing issues of racial

inequality and desegregation firmly into the spotlight. Parks devoted her life to social service and the civil rights movement, never hesitating to speak out. She received numerous awards for her effort, including the Presidential Medal of Freedom and Congress's highest honor, the Congressional Gold Medal.

Ruby Bridges (1954 -)

Proving that even the smallest members of society can make a big difference, Ruby Bridges was only six years old when she helped integrate the New Orleans public school system. In 1960, she became the first African American child to attend an all-white school in the South. Her brave walk to school, surrounded by U.S. marshals, was immortalized by Norman Rockwell in the painting *The Problem We All Live With*. The school's integration caused the community to erupt in protest, and Bridges had to endure daily threats; only one teacher in the school was willing to teach her. As an adult, Bridges created the Ruby Bridges Foundation to promote tolerance through education.

Martin Luther King, Jr. (1929-1968)

Arguably the most prominent of all civil rights activists, Martin Luther King, Jr. started as a Baptist minister but ultimately preached to a global audience. During the 1950's and 1960's he demanded equality for African Americans, organizing peaceful protests and inspiring a nation through his speeches. The most famous was his "I Have a Dream" speech, which he gave to more than 200,000 demonstrators at the March on Washington in 1963. In 1964, King became the youngest recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize; he was awarded the Congressional Medal after his death. King was tragically assassinated in 1968, and his extraordinary contribution to our country is commemorated every January by a national holiday.

Thurgood Marshall (1908-1993)

The first black justice of the U.S. Supreme Court, Thurgood Marshall courageously legislated for equality for African Americans and all minorities, influencing numerous landmark cases. He spent more than twenty years as the lead lawyer for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). It was in this role in 1954 that he successfully tried the historic *Brown v Board of Education* case, defeating the “separate but equal” doctrine by ending segregation in public schools. President Lyndon B. Johnson appointed Marshall to the Supreme Court in 1967, where he continued to challenge discrimination in all forms.

Barack Obama (1961-)

The first African American elected to the nation’s highest office, Barack Obama became the forty-fourth president of the United States on January 20, 2009. Running a campaign that heralded change, Obama energized a young voting population and beat out Republican senator John McCain in the general election. Prior to becoming president, Obama served as a U.S. senator and an Illinois state senator. Obama is also an author, and in law school he became the first African American to serve as president of the Harvard Law Review.

Adapted from the book *Our Children Can Soar*